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Contested federal elections in increasingly commercialized media: a diachronic analysis of elections news coverage in Switzerland

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Abstract: In view of the sinking level of consensus and the allegedly growing ‘presidentialization’ of politics in Switzerland, this paper asks whether this process can be explained by the ‘mediatization of politics’, enforced by the commercialization of the media. Taking a comparative approach in analyzing news coverage about executive and parliamentary elections from 1960 to 2011 in three different media types, it shows an increasing focus on executive elections, triggered not only by increasing political conflict but also by commercialized ‘media logic’. Attention to the executive is highest in the commercialized tabloid paper and lowest in the less commercialized quality paper, which only much later starts to focus on these elections. Contested executive elections have become attractive for commercialized media to focus on prominent figures and dramatize conflicts. This news reporting about politics arguably gives incentives for political actors to contest executive elections, thus intensifying the transformation of the political system.

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Introduction

One important reason for the transformation of Western democracies is claimed to be the mediatization of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Esser 2013). In addition to the fact that the media increasingly become the main source for citizens to learn about politics, media become independent from politics and dependent on the market, therefore change their way of political reporting according to their own commercialized ‘media logic’ and increasingly put pressure on political actors to adapt to this new logic as they strive to find (favorable) media attention and reach their target audience (Strömbäck 2008). In this context, politics, which citizens mainly experience through the media, becomes an increasingly competitive contest, where few prominent personalities, their campaign tactics and intense conflicts and negative confrontations take center stage at the expense of pluralist, consensus-oriented, substantive debate (Kriesi 2014: 366). This process constitutes a challenge especially for consensus-oriented democracies with a high degree of power-sharing, like Switzerland (Landerer 2014).

In a comparative perspective, however, it is unclear to what extent mediatization of politics actually takes place in Switzerland, even if one restricts oneself to only one dimension of mediatization, namely the change in media coverage about politics. With a focus on differences among countries, Switzerland is still considered not a prime example of the mediatization of politics. Scholars point at the ongoing high quality of public debate during direct-democratic votes (Marquis et al. 2012; Kriesi 2012a), for example, or the low level of personalization (Kriesi 2012b). With a focus on differences over time, some scholars observe only few indications of growing media logic in political reporting in Switzerland (Umbricht and Esser 2014: 12) while others show a marked increase, for example in scandals and media hypes (Imhof 2011: 124–42).

With our paper, we want to fill some of this gap by analyzing media coverage about parliamentary and executive elections in Switzerland in a diachronic perspective. We start with the assumption that several factors shape elections news coverage. Hopmann et al. (2011), for instance, point at the importance of both ‘political power’ and the ‘media market’ (in the sense of commercialization). On one hand, scholars – especially from political science – explain differences in media content by stressing the importance of political structures (e.g. the difference between presidential and parliamentary systems, cf. Kriesi 2012b) and actual behavior of political actors (campaign activities by political actors; for direct-democratic campaigns cf. Hänggli 2012). Usually, political structures are analyzed regarding the ‘real’ power structures, and political behavior regarding the level of conflict and confrontation. In both cases, the well-known argument about a ‘structural bias’ in the media goes, increasing power and increasing conflict about the ‘real’ problems will trigger more media attention because media tend to follow actors and processes that are deemed important (van Dalen 2012: 34). With this line of reasoning, one might expect the media merely to reflect the effects of globalization and Europeanization on multi-level governance structures, which lead to an ‘empowerment’ of executive branches at the detriment of Parliament (Kriesi 2014: 364).

Other scholars on the other hand, however, argue that it is the logic of commercialized news media itself which heavily shapes news coverage (Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011). In this sense, commercialization on the level of media structures (e.g. degree of profit-orientation) has an independent impact on media content. In this view, the media increasingly focus on a restricted set of powerful

actors because these actors are considered more newsworthy in the sense that they would capture the interest of an increasingly volatile audience. Also, by covering only few and powerful actors, the media can more easily portray politics as a drama between important protagonists and antagonists which, again, will hopefully catch the attention of readers, listeners and viewers. With this line of reasoning, one would expect executive elections to be attractive to commercialized media, also compared to parliamentary elections with their much wider spectrum of less well-known candidates.

To test these diverging assumptions, we analyze media attention to all executive elections between 1960 and 2011. To take into account political factors, we examine whether conflicted and contested executive elections increase media attention. To take into account commercialization as a factor, not only do we compare media attention to executive elections with that awarded to parliamentary elections (a type of election less prone to mediatization effects in Switzerland) but we also include three different media types which, in general, are very differently shaped by commercialized media logic. Obviously, tabloid media are more commercialized than quality media and thus display a higher degree of media logic in their political reporting (fög 2014). By setting media attention to executive elections in relation to media attention to parliamentary elections, and in relation to the level of conflict and the type of media, we try to contribute to what extent we can speak of increasing mediatization of politics where commercialized media logic goes hand in hand with political actors adapting to this logic.

We start by discussing the structural antecedents of election news coverage in the Swiss case: political factors and the according news factors relevance and conflict on the one hand and the possible influence of media types (and the change of media structures) as a structural antecedent on the other hand. We then present the hypotheses, discuss the findings and conclude with a brief discussion on the state of mediatization in Switzerland.

Political relevance and political conflict as factors for election news coverage in Switzerland

As described above, election news coverage is shaped by a multitude of factors. Among these, political structures and political cultures are considered highly important. Usually, political structures are analyzed regarding the ‘real’ power structures, and political cultures regarding the level of conflict and confrontation. In both cases, the well-known argument about a ‘structural bias’ in the media goes, increasing power and increasing conflict will trigger more media attention because media tend to follow actors and processes that are deemed important (van Dalen 2012: 34).

Political relevance

One obvious news factor is the importance or ‘political relevance’ of political actors and institutions (Wolfsfeld 2011: 9–11; Tresch 2009: 71). Their decisions have a higher reach, which makes them newsworthy (Eilders 2006: 11). This helps explain, among other indicators, why in countries with high power concentration news coverage accordingly focuses more on few prominent political actors (e.g. Presidents, Prime Ministers) than on parties or anonymous collectives. In contrast to majoritarian democracies (cf. Lijphart 1999), consensus democracies such as Switzerland ‘emphasize the *diffusion of power (power-sharing)* through a multiparty government, balance of power between the executive and legislative (...)’ (Vatter 2008: 4, our emphasis). In line with these expectations, van Dalen (2012) finds a stronger executive dominance in majoritarian Great Britain than in consensus democratic Denmark where, thanks to power-sharing, parliament is deemed relatively important and therefore finds substantial media attention. Similarly, Kriesi (2012b) finds a relatively low focus on the ‘top 10’ political actors in news coverage before elections in Switzerland compared to majoritarian democracies. In short, election news coverage is shaped by the institutional design of the political system (Kriesi 2012b: 841).

Most research on election news has taken this line of reasoning seriously – but only insofar as authors conduct comparisons across actor types or across countries, i.e. asking whether large parties receive more coverage than small parties (e.g. Norris et al. 1999), incumbents get more attention

than challengers (e.g. Hopmann et al. 2011) or whether media in consensus democracies focus less on persons than media in majoritarian system (e.g. Kriesi 2012b). Surprisingly, scholars have hardly been interested in comparing different *types* of elections, and when comparing elections news coverage across countries, they do not always justify why, for instance, they compare presidential elections (and not parliamentary elections) in country X with parliamentary elections in country Y (cf. Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011). The high personalization observed for US politics, for example, might also stem from the fact that scholars mainly examine presidential elections; a benchmark such as the House elections is usually missing. This lack of research is unfortunate because government and parliament are said to have different news values in general. The work of the executive with the execution of policy proposals is perceived to have a more direct impact on people's lives than political debates in parliament and is thus more relevant to cover (van Dalen 2012: 35).

In this light, experts on Switzerland's political system give only inconclusive evaluations whether the executive has become more important over time. On one hand, parliament has actually increased its power in the last decades in terms of constitutional mandates. Also, Sciarini (2014) sees an 'emancipation' of parliament as the pre-parliamentary phase dominated by interest groups loses in importance at the benefit of the parliamentary phase dominated by (government) parties; when judging the reputational power, surveyed political actors consider the Federal Council to be very important, but with no changes between the 1970s and the 2000s (123–124). On the other hand, parliament has lost some of its power to the executive in the last few decades, also because of a lack of resources and only low degrees of professionalization (Kriesi 2001). In sum, Vatter (2008: 27) argues that the Swiss political system has become '*slightly* more majoritarian' in the last few decades (our emphasis), with power-sharing decreasing at the benefit of the executive. Thus, the media possibly focus more on the executive for its increasing relevance, but the rather limited extent of this process that Vatter describes does not suggest that media reporting would have to increase substantially. Should the media begin to focus much more on the executive, one would have to explain this with other factors, one of which is political conflict.

Political conflict

Conflict is an important news factor (Eilders 2006). The more contested and the more controversial elections are, the more the media have reasons to cover them. Conflicts are 'relevant' if more and more (powerful) political actors are involved, increasing the scope of this problem and the stakes of the actors involved.

On one hand, stressing the stable nature of the overall architecture of Switzerland's political system, authors consider Switzerland still a 'normal' case of consensus democracy (Vatter 2008), where consensus-oriented corporatism still dominates (Armingeon 2011). In the case of parliamentary elections, competition in a fragmented multi-party system has not fundamentally changed, with the number of competing parties staying around the same in the last decades (Vatter 2008: 7–8). Also, with a multi-party government and the mechanisms of direct democracy, parliamentary and executive elections do not lead to fundamental power shifts. In this sense of relatively low impact, these elections lack a high level of conflict and relevance.

On the other hand, there are good reasons to assume that both parliamentary and executive elections have become more conflicted and contested in the last decades. Indications of this are, first, the end of the 'magic formula' in 2003 and the ongoing discussion about representation in government, second, the change of the party system with the rise of the transformed right-wing populist Swiss People's Party SVP in the 1990s and early 2000s and its contribution to the polarization of the political contest, third – and also related to the SVP's rise – a general increase of conflict among powerful actors such as 'the replacement of corporatist arrangements in the preparatory phase by confrontational politics in Parliament' (Sciarini 2014: 128), and fourth, the increase of political marketing by political parties, seen in a growth of political advertising before elections. At the latest elections in

2011, parties invested 18% more in political ads than four years before (Hermann 2012). All in all, we conclude that the overall level of conflict might still not be very high compared to other countries but it certainly and markedly has increased in the last decades.

Commercialization as a driving force in election news coverage in Switzerland

While there is good reason to assume an importance of these factors (political relevance, conflict) for the amount of media attention to elections, two problems remain. First, executive elections as such might not only load on the news factor 'relevance' but on the news factor 'prominence'. Second, while a mere portrayal of conflicts might mirror their relevance, a dramatization of conflict focusing on confrontation rather than on compromise does not. Both indicators, a focus on prominent figures and a dramatization of conflict, are more closely in line with the process of commercialization (Mazzoleni 2008a).

Switzerland's media system has been affected by commercialization comparatively late, but then with rapid and dramatic intensity. An empirical analysis of media structures between 1960 to 2011 confirms that the disappearance of papers with strong ties to parties and other intermediary actors (Udris and Lucht 2014), the growing press concentration on few commercialized media organizations and the growing importance of commercialized tabloid and 'free' commuter papers progressed in 'liberal' countries first (e.g. United States, United Kingdom) (Hallin and Mancini 2004) and only later in 'democratic-corporatist' countries (e.g. Germany, Austria, Switzerland). Interestingly, Switzerland even within the democratic-corporatist group of countries is a 'late starter' but, for instance, now shows a higher press concentration than in UK's highly commercialized media system (Lucht and Udris 2013). True, the extent of deregulation in the broadcasting sector (e.g. allowing private broadcasters to apply for licences) is limited in Switzerland's small media market, with even small regional broadcasters receiving around half of their income through public licence fees. But in the press and online sector, the markedly sinking advertising revenue since the 2000s and the establishment of a 'free lunch' culture among media consumers (cost-free information through free commuter papers, now the largest newspapers in Switzerland, and through newspaper internet sites) means sinking resources for (expensive) quality journalism and a rapid growth in use of lower-quality media (fög 2014). On the meso level of news organizations, commercialization over time affects organizations with strong ties to parties and intermediary actors, who either went out of business or loosened these ties. The *NZZ Gruppe*, for instance, in the late 1990s loosened its restrictions to acquire its shares; membership in the FDP was no longer required. Other large media organizations turned into highly diversified media corporations, where the actual production of news is only one part of the business next to event-marketing (e.g. *Ringier*), or they became listed on the stock market (e.g. *Tamedia* in the 1990s). As we know from the literature, market-listed media organizations experience higher shareholder pressures and are more highly profit-driven than other types of media organizations (McMenamin et al. 2012; Benson and Hallin 2007: 28); this stands in tandem with commercialized media logic.

With this differentiation from politics and de-differentiation from the market, the media have developed a new 'media logic', which means they increasingly operate according to their own logic independent from 'political logic' (Mazzoleni 2008a). In its most basic form, the commercialization of the media is reflected content-wise in a growing focus on 'soft news' instead of 'hard news' (Reinemann et al. 2012; Curran et al. 2010: 7–9), as the media hold this a viable and promising strategy to capture the attention of an increasingly volatile audience. 'Soft news' coverage means that politics as 'hard news' topics as such are covered less frequently than before – and only if they fulfill the media logic. As for elections news coverage, scholars dealing with the 'framing' of politics (de Vreese 2012: 368) suggest that the 'game frame', i.e. portraying politics as a 'game' or a 'horse race' with winners and losers, is a result of commercialization (Aalberg 2012; Strömbäck and van Aelst 2010). Media logic means a dramatization of conflict, not just the mere description of relevant conflicts. Second, commercialized media focus less on ideas and more on persons, prefera-

bly prominent figures. As the media attribute responsibility for moral and political failures and grievances to clear and visible politicians as individuals and tend to downplay the structural bases of political problems, reducing the complexity of politics, this ‘media populism’ (Mazzoleni 2008b) better serves to connect to the audience (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999: 219–221).

Against this backdrop, executive elections are expected to be more attractive to the media than parliamentary elections (cf. Udris 2012): executive elections include a much more limited set of actors, and they often include prominent politicians, while elections to parliament, where seats are awarded per electoral district, include a regionally fragmented set of several thousand candidates, most of which less or hardly known to the media, if at all to the wider public.

Methodologically, the challenge now is to disentangle the causal factors we explained above. All factors – relevance, conflict, commercialization – suggest that the media increasingly focus on the executive over time. One way of tackling this issue is by treating commercialization not only as a process but as state which shows itself differently in different media. The argument then goes that, once we have established that a news outlet in general, meaning not only in election periods, shows more signs of commercialized media logic (e.g. more personalization, more sensationalism, etc.), and if it turns out that it also focuses more on executive elections than on parliamentary elections and more so than a news outlet generally less shaped by commercial pressures, this is most likely an indication that this commercialized news outlet does this because it considers executive elections to be especially attractive.

In order to help find out which news outlets in general could be considered more commercialized than others, we rely on the concept of *media types* as antecedents of election news coverage (Strömbäck and van Aelst 2010). Media types can be considered groups of outlets that take a distinct position in the journalistic field (Benson 2004): they share certain characteristics such as similar audience in terms of education, age, etc., business models (e.g. more or less reliance on advertising), political or legal frameworks (e.g. public broadcasting with an official mandate, supported by licence fees), organizational cultures or news content (e.g. more or less focus on ‘hard news’). In the press market, this leads to a distinction between subscription papers, tabloids, and free commuter papers. As for business models, especially regular daily papers rely on a stable audience: around 90% of their circulation comes from subscribers,¹ whereas tabloids rely much more on street sales (only around 50% come from regular subscribers); commuter papers completely rely on advertising. This daily fight for a volatile audience puts tabloids and free papers under more commercial pressures as their more serious daily counterparts. Like in most Western press markets, subscription papers again can be divided into two groups, ‘quality’ and ‘mid-market’ papers.

The fact that different media types are really differently shaped by commercial media logic is substantiated by empirical findings on actual media content. In the Swiss case, large-scale studies show remarkable differences not mainly between media channels but between media types. For example, in the press sector, the share of attention to soft news topics such as sports or human interest compared to hard news topics (politics, economy, culture) is highest in the free dailies and the tabloid dailies and lowest in daily subscription papers (fög 2014: 91). As expected, the ‘quality’ paper *NZZ* devotes more attention to hard news both in its editions and on its front page than the ‘mid-market’ paper *Tagess-Anzeiger* (fög 2014: 129–134).

Bearing in mind these characteristics of media types, one would expect substantial differences also in the kind of elections news coverage. Put another way: Should the attention to executive elections be higher in more commercialized media types (e.g. the tabloids) than in less commercialized types (e.g. quality papers), this would be an indication that executive elections fit the media logic best.

¹ Circulation rates come from the Swiss institution WEMF (numbers are for the year 2012).

Hypotheses

As a starting point, we conduct a comparison between two different types of elections over time. The attention in the media to national executive elections is compared with the attention to national parliamentary elections. In a general perspective, the factors of commercialization, the slightly growing importance of the executive (relevance), and the growing conflict intensity concerning representation in government (conflict) together lead us to expect that the media will increasingly cover executive elections. We therefore postulate our first hypothesis as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Over time, media devote increasing attention to executive elections, also in comparison to parliamentary elections.

In a second step, we turn our focus to the characteristics of the various executive elections, especially the level of conflict. Conflict as a news factor is expected to increase media attention. The level of contestation varies for each election and depends also on situational factors, but generally over time, conflict about the representation in government has intensified, in particular concerning the representation of women in the 1980s and concerning parties in the 2000s, which in 2003 led to the ‘end of the magic formula’.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The more contested an executive election, the higher the media attention.

To determine whether we could interpret conflict and contestation as an indicator of commercialization (instead of political relevance), we check to what extent the three media types differ in media attention to these elections. In their general reporting, quality papers in particular and to a lesser degree mid-market papers display fewer features of commercial media logic than tabloid papers. Since we consider executive elections – and especially contested executive elections – to especially fit the commercialized media logic (better than parliamentary elections), we formulate our next hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): The attention to executive elections is highest in the tabloid paper and lowest in the quality paper, with the mid-market paper falling in between.

Since commercialization is seen as a process, tabloids are expected to increasingly focus on executive elections first. But with increasing commercial pressure, the quality papers and especially the mid-market papers are expected to catch up and increase their reporting on executive elections.

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): Over time, first the mid-market paper and then the quality will also increase their attention to executive elections and begin to close the gap between the tabloid paper.

Data and method

In a diachronic analysis, we focus on the salience of election news coverage over the last fifty years, starting with 1960 and thus a period with the beginning of the ‘magic formula’. We distinguish between news coverage about executive elections (henceforth *EE*) and parliamentary elections as a benchmark (henceforth *PE*). We focus on newspapers because the press along with television was and still is the dominant media sector in Switzerland. The media sample consists of newspapers shaped differently by media logic, i.e. a tabloid (*Blick*), a ‘mid-market’ paper (*Tages-Anzeiger*) and a ‘quality’ paper (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*).

To determine media attention to elections, we rely on an existing, ongoing database of media agendas where the most salient ‘communication events’ or ‘issues’ in several Swiss newspapers since 1910 have been captured (Imhof 1993; Eisenegger 2005; Fögl 2014: 243). In each newspaper edition for each day of a calendar year, researchers have been assigning each article with a minimal size (20% of a newspaper page) in all sections (with the exception of the sports section) to a communication event. A communication event ‘Six-day war’ in 1967, for instance, includes all articles focusing on this war in the Middle East, whereas the communication event ‘Parliamentary elections 1967’

includes all articles focusing on candidates, opinion polls, comments on election issues, and all articles where policy issues are described as part of a discussion in the context of the upcoming elections.²

For each newspaper and each year, the database finally includes and describes the twenty largest communication events (i.e. those with most articles). Between 1960 and 2011, the period we analyze, there are thus 3120 outlet-specific communication events, i.e. 1040 per newspaper. To determine the importance a newspaper awards to a communication event, one can measure its attention share by comparing it to the overall attention to all 20 issues on the top agenda. For instance, in the tabloid paper *Blick*, the executive election in 2009 for the vacant seat of Pascal Couchepin was ranked number seven on *Blick's* agenda. Out of the overall news hole of *Blick* that year (i.e. the 20 largest communication events), the attention share of executive elections was 6.7% (43 articles out of 645).

Out of 13 *PE* and 34 *EE* that actually took place between 1960 and 2011, we found 91 cases when media put an election on their media agenda (top 20) out of the maximum of 141 cases, if each of the three newspapers had covered each of the 47 elections. These 91 cases amount to 5'498 articles total. For each of the 91 cases, we look at the media attention share of an election within a newspaper's media agenda during a full calendar year. In 50 cases, an election did not find enough media attention to be included in the top 20 agenda that year. In these 50 cases, we use a value of '0' for media attention share.

To take into account the level of conflict and contestation about an executive election, we use three indicators: first, replacement elections (instead of regular 'confirmation' elections, because incumbent office-holders would normally not be challenged), second the contestation of official party candidates – with the contestation about female candidates as a subtype of this candidate contestation –, and third, as the hardest of the three indicators, the contestation of seats by an established government party. For the indicators, we rely on official information about actual vote behavior in parliament (parliamentary bulletin) since we cannot evaluate the universe of various party actors' statements regarding candidates outside of the public election debate in parliament (e.g. media interviews, regional party conventions, 'back-stage' of politics such as lobbying, etc.). In the case of contestation of candidates, we argue that 50 votes for candidates other than the elected candidate indicate a relatively high level of contestation. For example, in 1987, Adolf Ogi (SVP) was elected with 132 votes to replace Leon Schlumpf (SVP), but his candidacy was contested (the seat of the SVP was not): his competitor from the same party, Hans-Rudolf Nebiker, received 69 votes.

Results

We now look at media attention of executive elections (*EE*) from 1960 to 2011 in three German-speaking newspapers, using media attention to parliamentary elections (*PE*) as a benchmark. In the following figure, we display in columns average values of media attention, taking into account media attention values of the three different newspapers. The periodization was done also to keep the ratio between the actual number of *EE* and *PE* relatively constant. Changes in media attention were analyzed with the Mann-Whitney U test for significance, as the variable does not show a normal distribution (in one third of the cases, an election did not make it to the top agenda).

Figure 1 shows that *PE* generate more media attention than *EE* in all three periods. To explain this high attention, one could argue that the 'input' for journalists is higher before *PE* than before *EE*, simply because more parties and more candidates are involved. Also, one could claim that journalists are acutely aware of their normative obligation to cover *PE* and offer a forum for actors and

² The ongoing assignment of articles to communication events yields satisfactory results regarding intercoder reliability (example for 2011, the year with the most recent data: Holsti .83).

issues before *PE* so voters can make up their mind (van Aelst and de Swert, 2009). Over time, there is no significant change in media attention to *PE*. A newspaper on average devotes around 12 per cent of its yearly news hole to *PE*, and *PE* usually rank among the five largest communication events in a year. (In 14 out of the maximum 39 cases, they even constitute the largest communication event that year.) Thus, one can safely say that *PE* still become news, as there is hardly any variation across these three phases. However, there is considerable variation in media attention within these phases, with some elections receiving only around 7% (1963) or 9% (1999) and some up to 15% (1979) or 17% (2007). This variation is most pronounced in the tabloid and least in the quality paper (not displayed). This volatility, especially for the tabloid paper, points to situational factors, where the overall context (e.g. important international events) and the type or intensity of political campaigns determine the amount of attention that a *PE* receives in a given year. Another reason we do not see a trend over time might be an overlap of two phenomena: the growing polarization of the Swiss party system is expected to increase media attention to *PE* (focus on conflict), while the (perceived) sinking relevance of Parliament decreases media attention. However, this calls for extensive research that would analyze for each article whether there is indeed a shift towards more conflict framing, if not an increase in dramatized ‘horse race’ reporting.

While media attention to *PE* does not increase, executive elections (*EE*) increasingly are in the spotlight of the media. Average media attention to *EE* increases significantly, from 0.4% (first phase: A) to 3.6% (second phase: B) and 5.2% (third phase: C). This means that the ‘gap’ in media attention between the two types of election begins to close. In the 1960-1970s, the ratio between *EE* and *PE* was around 1:25; in the 1980-1990s, it was 1:3 and in the most recent phase, it was close to 1:2. In this sense, one could speak of a growing importance of the executive in the media compared to parliament. We consider H1 to be supported.

[Figure 1 about here]

We now attempt to analyze the actual characteristics of each executive election. Our interest lies in finding out whether the media report the elections primarily because they are de facto more contested and therefore more ‘relevant’ (H2). To do so, we work with multivariate linear regression models with robust estimations that integrate time periods, the level of conflict and, finally, media types (cf. Table 1).

In *model 1*, we only include time periods as independent variables, aggregating years into four periods. Empirically, media attention is low until the end of the 1970s (therefore phase 1: 1960-1979). Between 1980 and 2011, we now distinguish three periods. According to Vatter (2014: 531–534), Switzerland’s concordance democracy has changed in the last decades mainly because political elites show a sinking level of cooperation in a climate of growing polarization. He determines 1992 as a turning point in this respect with the mainstream parties’ failure in the vote on the EWR and the subsequent transformation of the SVP into a right-wing populist party (Mudde, 2007) and its rise in electoral appeal (phase 2: 1980-1991). The SVP’s rise constitutes a major change also in the perception of elites as regards the perceived reputational power of political actors in Switzerland. The Swiss People’s Party, which was not central to the power structure in the early 1970s, has come to be perceived as the most important actor of all in the 2000s (Sciarini 2014: 124). Following this line of reasoning, we consider 2003 another turning point, the year when the SVP managed to receive a second seat in government – the ‘end of the magic formula’ and growing government instability, as two incumbent office-holders were not re-elected within a short time (Metzler in 2003, Blocher in 2007) (cf. Vatter 2014: 519–537) (phase 3: 1992-2002; phase 4: 2003-2011).

Model 1 (cf. Table 1) shows that in comparison with the first phase, media attention increases especially in the second phase (+3 PP), more modestly in the third phase (+3.7 PP) and then again markedly in the most recent phase (+5.3 PP).

[Table 1 about here]

In model 2, we include indicators of conflict and contestation. To begin with, contestation of *EE* has increased over the years, but with differences in the periods (Table 2). Replacement elections, the weakest indicator of contestation, are fairly common in four periods. The contestation about suggested party candidates has increased since the 1980s; since then, it has been part of every single *EE*. As a special case of conflict, it also shows that the conflict about representation of women was an issue (only) in the second phase and the third phase. As for the hardest indicator, up to 1991, none of the established parties attacked another seat. In the period between 1992 and 2002, 38% were contested; and in the most recent phase, 71% were contested, mostly with involvement of the right-wing populist SVP (both active and passive).

[Table 2 about here]

Model 2 in Table 1 clearly shows that these conflict indicators explain much of the media attention. Model 2 significantly increases the explanatory power ($R^2=.455$ vs. $R^2=.356$ for model 1). In line with this, the *EE* with most media attention at all is the 2010 election (two replacements, SP seat attacked by SVP), followed by the 1993 election (non-election of female candidate) and the 2003 election (CVP seat attacked by SVP). Among the conflict indicators, especially replacement elections (compared to regular *Gesamterneuerungswahlen*) and the conflict about women representation trigger media attention. The contestation of candidates as such increases attention but only slightly. As for the contestation of seats, the model shows a certain effect. The reason this effect is not stronger is the fact that the SVP's first attack in 1999 does not (yet) lead to large media attention. However, all seven elections since 2000, especially when an SVP seat was involved or the SVP contested a seat, lead to higher media attention on average than those two elections since 2000 when the SVP was hardly involved. This effect also shows in the significant impact of the factor 'period 2003-2011'. This suggests that the growing contestation and government instability with the end of the 'magic formula' is reflected in media content. In this sense, H2 is supported.

We now turn our attention to the question whether commercialized media devote more attention to *EE* than less commercialized media (H3a). Model 3, which integrates three media types, clearly shows the expected results. Overall, the tabloid, which is generally the most commercialized among the three newspapers, focuses most on *EE*, followed by the mid-market paper and then by the quality paper, which also in general displays the lowest degree of media logic (cf. also Figure 2).³ The difference between *NZZ* and *Blick* is statistically significant, as is the difference between *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger* (the difference between *Blick* and *Tages-Anzeiger* is not significant but it points in the expected direction). The increase of R^2 from .455 to .585 shows that the data fit the statistical model much better. Commercialized media logic, which is reflected differently in the three media types, clearly matters.

Again, the low attention to *EE* in the quality paper *NZZ* is *not* a result from the paper's focus on international issues, which slightly minimizes the chances for domestic issues, including elections, to be listed on the top 20 agenda. This becomes clear when we compare media attention between the two types of domestic elections. In the quality paper, *EE* (1.4%) are covered around ten times less

³ This does not say that the *NZZ* in absolute terms (number of articles) covers *EE* less than the other two papers, but it means that the newspaper deems other issues (e.g. policy issues) more important by setting those issues on its top agenda.

than *PE* (10.7%). In the mid-market paper, *EE* (3.1%) are covered around five times less than *PE* (14.5%), and in the tabloid, *EE* (4.5%) receive already half as much attention as do *PE* (9.4%) (not displayed). Thus, it is safe to conclude that commercialized news logic goes hand in hand with a focus on executive elections.

[Figure 2 about here]

As for the process of commercialization (H3b), Figure 2 underlines that a) all papers increasingly focus on *EE* over time and b) the increasing focus on *EE* starts earliest in the tabloid and latest in the quality paper *NZZ*. The tabloid, which in the first phase starts on a higher level than the other papers, increases its media attention mainly from the first to the second phase (statistically significant), more so than the mid-market paper does (also statistically significant). The quality paper, however, seems to be reluctant even in the 1980s to devote much attention to *EE* (no significant change). Again, it seems implausible to argue that the quality paper, which has been covering ‘hard news’ politics intensively and extensively, simply missed out the ‘real’ relevance of *EE* in the 1980s. (One alternative explanation is the quality paper’s elite-orientation that favors the status quo; in that logic, we know from the literature on media populism and political populism (Mazzoleni 2008b), challengers are considered populist and therefore not worthy to be given equal treatment as the more serious contenders.) It is only in the 1990 and especially in the most recent phase that the quality paper substantially increases its executive election coverage, narrowing the gap to the other two newspapers. Thus, H3b is supported. Furthermore, in line with H3a, the quality paper still consistently shows lower average values than the relatively more commercialized papers.

Let us conclude with an example that shows how extensively commercialized media, and especially after the end of the magic formula, deal with executive elections. We take two elections from two different periods whose level of conflict was more or less the same (measured by our indicators). In 1966, an election was held to replace Paul Chaudet (FDP), and in 2006 to replace Josef Deiss (CVP). In both cases, the candidate selection was contested but not the seat as such. In both cases, this was the first election after an ‘extraordinary’ event (1966: resignation of Chaudet after public pressure in the ‘Mirage affair’; 2006: first election since the end of the magic formula in 2003). However, the 1966 election generated considerably less attention (not a top 20 issue in any of the three newspapers) than the 2006 election (average: 2.8%; as expected, media types matter: *Blick* 5.1%, *TA* 3.4%, *NZZ* not top 20 issue). Obviously, in this most recent phase, *EE* have become the focus of the media even in cases where conflict intensity is actually quite low (of course, attention is still even higher in cases of contested elections). For commercialized media, not only the possibility to *dramatize* conflicts but also the news factor *prominence* seem to play a role. Given these findings, we assume that executive elections will keep their important place high on the media agenda and shape elections campaigns in the years to come.

Conclusion

Our empirical analysis showed that in Switzerland, over time, executive elections have gained more and more media attention, also in direct comparison with elections to parliament. There are reasons to see this increase as a result of changing political structures (Vatter 2008), with the executive becoming more important and thus the media covering it more for its increasing relevance (Kriesi 2012b; Wolfsfeld 2011). Also, our study suggests that highly contested executive elections trigger more media attention than those elections which are not, and empirically these contested elections increase over time. With media coverage reflecting these patterns, our data is another clear indication for the increasing level of conflict in Swiss politics.

However, our diachronic comparative analysis showed that political factors are only one part of the story. Commercialization of the media is an important driving force. The most commercialized tabloid paper examined in this paper is the one where this ‘executive dominance’ (van Dalen 2012) is most visible in comparison with two less commercialized papers. Over time, executive elections trigger large media attention first in the tabloid, then in the ‘mid-market’ paper and only more recently in the ‘quality’ paper. This pattern suggests that the growing attention to executive elections is more than just a reaction to a growing ‘relevance’ of the executive or an increasing contestation about representation in the executive. The mass media focus on executive elections also because this type of elections arguably better fits the commercialized media logic than parliamentary elections, as the media can focus on a limited set of well-known candidates (personalization, prominent actors), which fight for a maximum number of seven seats, and focus on the political drama. In this sense, parliamentary elections, despite their importance for a democratic society, lose visibility at the benefit of the executive. Given these findings, we can speak of an increasing personalization and ‘presidentialization’ and ‘de-parliamentarization’ of political communication in Switzerland.

We have shown that *media types* clearly matter as antecedents for news coverage during election periods: structures specific to a media type (e.g. business model, which also connects to the level of commercialization) are reflected in media content. It is therefore worth using media types in comparative research more explicitly and more systematically. Of course, our results cannot be strictly generalized beyond the Swiss case. But the importance of media types and the different effects in different periods over time shows that it is worth considering these factors in countries with a similarly late but rapid transformation of the media sector, such as Austria or the Netherlands. In Austria, scholars point at the successful ‘interplay’ of media populism (mainly the tabloids) and political populism (mainly the FPÖ) (Art 2007; Plasser 2003). In the Netherlands, this effect is possibly restricted to certain period of time or certain elections, for instance the 2002 elections with the extraordinary media attention to Pim Fortuyn, when “political relations ... suddenly spiraled out of equilibrium” (Koopmans and Muis 2009: 660). More recently, the level of populism in the media has been on the decline (Bos and Brants: 2014).

That said, as regards the thesis of the mediatization of politics and the disentanglement of its various dimensions (e.g. media content, adaptation by political actors) (Strömbäck 2008), we cannot resolve the famous ‘chicken and egg’ question with our design. There are indications that media coverage reflects increasing political activities (growing contestation) but at the same time, the consistently high attention to executive elections in the tabloid points at the importance of commercialized media logic as an ‘opportunity structure’ for political actors. This opportunity structure has been markedly changing, with commercialized media logic not only increasing within certain media types but especially on the level of the overall media system. The audience of quality and mid-market media becomes smaller compared to that of tabloid media. This is aggravated by the rise of cost-free commuter papers, which within a decade have become the largest newspapers in Switzerland. According to data available for the latest election year (2011), which includes media coverage on front pages, not only do cost-free papers display a tabloid-like news content in general but, like tabloid papers and unlike daily subscription papers, they devote more attention to executive elections than to parliamentary elections (fög 2012: 148). Taken together, this development has arguably been giving incentives to political actors to contest candidates and seats in executive elections, as this would give them high (and free) publicity.

One avenue for election (news) research then would be to collect more material from the supply side of politics, e.g. documents displaying the degree of inner-party conflicts before elections, in-depth surveys with political representatives etc. to ask to what extent political actors in Switzerland ‘go public’ and intensify their campaign activities also before executive elections. Also, we suggest more fine-grained media content analyses which not only take into account our prime indicator (media attention) but which capture news characteristics for each article and on the level of claim-making. Needless to say, should these results then show that a mediatization of politics not only

affects the behavior of individual political actors and political parties but the overall political institutional field, they would contribute to a much wider debate on how rational, substantial decision-making processes can be conducted in an era of mediatized politics.

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Table 1: Explanatory factors for media attention to executive elections

		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
		B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
time	period 1960-1979	Reference		Reference		Reference	
	period 1980-1991	0.030 ***	0.0088	0.008	0.0111	0.008	0.0111
	period 1992-2002	0.037 ***	0.0103	0.019	0.0121	0.019	0.0121
	period 2003-2011	0.053 ***	0.0075	0.037 **	0.0119	0.037 **	0.0119
political conflict	replacement			0.016 **	0.0055	0.016 **	0.0055
	women			0.022 *	0.0088	0.022 *	0.0088
	seat (contested by established parties)			0.012	0.0102	0.012	0.0102
	candidate selection			0.006	0.0065	0.006	0.0065
media outlet	Blick (tabloid)					Reference	
	Tages-Anzeiger (mid-market)					-0.013 ***	0.0039
	NZZ (quality)					-0.031 ***	0.0057
Constant		0.004	0.0026	-0.008	0.0045	0.006	0.0055
R ²		0.356		0.455		0.585	
Adjusted R ²		0.336		0.414		0.545	

Dependent variable: attention share (number of articles) within top 20 communication events per outlet and year

* p < 0.05

** p < 0.01

*** p < 0.001

Table 2: Executive elections: level of contestation

	replacement		candidate selection		women		seat (contested by established parties)		all executive elections
period 1960-1979	8	67%	4	33%	0	0%	0	0%	12
period 1980-1991	7	100%	7	100%	4	57%	0	0%	7
period 1992-2002	6	75%	8	100%	3	38%	3	38%	8
period 2003-2011	5	71%	7	100%	1	14%	5	71%	7
<i>total</i>	26	76%	26	76%	8	24%	8	24%	34